

BANGLADESHI YOUTH AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE CLIMATE MOVEMENT



"While conducting surveys in the coastal areas, I realised how climate change was at the root of issues like lack of education, malnutrition, and soaring child marriage rates. However, 'climate change' is not a term that the masses are familiar with. I could not go up to the people alone and raise awareness about it. So, I formed a team and co-founded YouthNet for Climate Justice," shares 27-year-old Shakila Islam from Barishal. YouthNet for Climate Justice is a coastal youth-led movement that is now the largest network for climate advocacy in Bangladesh. When she was only 12 years old, Shakila and her family were hit by Super Cyclone Sidi, which affected more than eight million people in the country. Since then, she has been passionate about tackling the climate crisis and its multisectoral impacts. "Climate change is not just an environmental, economic or development problem; it is also a

gender, human rights and social justice issue," says Shakila. Since 2016, YouthNet for Climate Justice has been implementing various campaigns to establish the rights of people affected by climate change in the southern regions of Bangladesh. So far, they have mobilised two thousand volunteers and served 50 thousand members of marginalised communities across 40 districts. In 2018, they received the Joy Bangla Youth Award for their efforts. "Although we are one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change, we only contribute to global emissions by around 0.3 percent. This is a climate justice issue that must be brought up on global platforms," shares Shakila. Not only did she represent Bangladesh at the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and climate session, but she also was a founding member of Fridays for

Future Bangladesh, in line with the global climate strike movement led by Greta Thunberg. YouthNet for Climate Justice has also created a Coastal Youth Action Hub that promotes innovative solutions to adapt to climate change issues. "It is not possible to always migrate from coastal areas that have been hit by natural disasters. Therefore, we have initiatives to help people adapt to the climate crisis. Women and girls are the most vulnerable to climate issues since there are risks of sexual harassment and child marriage. We help mitigate these risks," says Shakila. When asked about her future plans, Shakila shared: "When Greta Thunberg started the global climate strike movement, she was only 13 years old. If she can do it, then why can't our Bangladeshi youth? I want to make Bangladesh a role model in tackling climate change."

By Mayabee Arannya

LEADING A COMMUNITY OUT OF DISASTER



Hashi Begum, from Uttar Manoshitola village in Barguna, took matters into her own hands when the Covid-19 pandemic first hit. She not only resolved to take care of her own family but her community as well. With the aid of the Cash for Work (CFW) scheme funded by Disaster Response and Recovery Facility (DRRF) of UNDP Bangladesh, and the support of her local community leaders, Hashi Begum became the resident hero of her village. "My husband had lost his job which was the only source of income for our family. On top of that, no one in the village would believe there was such a deadly virus that was spreading rapidly," recalls Hashi Begum. The socio-economic conditions were becoming more calamitous every day, more so in the rural areas of Bangladesh. Hashi Begum mentioned how many people in her community were initially sceptical about the virus, and did not believe they would be affected by it. "Amader gram e Corona nai (There's no such thing as Coronavirus in our village)" is what they would say when told to take adequate precautions. However, a determined Hashi refused to give in to the ignorance, misinformation,

and scepticism surrounding the dire reality of Covid-19. "I started talking to people around me, and convinced them to take Covid-19 seriously. I explained the concept of social distancing, and distributed masks to stop the spreading of the virus," explained Hashi Begum. "Luckily, they believed in me, as I was a member of their community and soon, they started wearing masks and maintaining safety measures such as regular hand-washing and social distancing." However, things took a turn for the worse when the already struggling village of Uttar Manoshitola came face-to-face with a cyclone. The community had already been suffering economically due to the extensive lockdown, and now the remaining resources were also being laid to waste. Hashi stepped up to lead her village to safety, ensuring that the locals reached the shelter safely, distributing relief, helping persons with disabilities, all the while maintaining Covid-related safety protocols. To address the economic fallout of Covid-19 and Cyclone Amphan, UNDP's DRRF in collaboration with Uttaran, started a CFW scheme in the areas that

had suffered the most. Hashi's village was on the list. The chairman of Gourichonna Union, in Barguna Sadar Upazila, listed Hashi Begum in the CFW scheme. As part of the arrangement, Hashi and other community members were tasked with repairing a road over the course of 20 days, where they would earn 300 taka for each day of work. Familiar with community work and a keen learner, Hashi took on an organisational role. She managed a group of 21 women and four men. With the money Hashi received while working for the CFW scheme, she bought a cow to help her earn some money by selling milk. Young, strong-willed and dedicated, Hashi Begum is a beacon of hope in her community who has shown exceptional organisational and leadership skills. "I have already worked actively with this campaign among a few others and I plan on continuing to partake in active community management in the future," says Hashi, who keeps herself involved with various types of community services.

By Maisha Syeda

A HERO OF THE PANDEMIC



"I come from a conservative background, where women played a subservient role. There is a saying that women of Mollabari cannot do anything on their own. However, this changed when I came into contact with some people who were working for community development. They inspired me to work for numerous voiceless women, and over the course of time, I have united 1,05,000 families through 425 Community Development Committees (CDCs)," says Kohinoor. Kohinoor Akter, now 42 years of age, was initially unable to continue her education after SSC. Despite the many barriers that stood in her way, she took inspiration from the people she met through the CDC and continued to work for her community. Now, Kohinoor, a mother of two, is an inspiration for thousands of women in Chattogram.

During the pandemic, she worked extensively in her area by taking initiatives to curb the spread of Covid-19, establishing 374 hand-washing stations and distributing over 66,000 bars of soap to the local people. Moreover, she has put relentless efforts to prevent child marriages and domestic violence. "Whenever we are informed about a child marriage being arranged, we immediately go there and try our best to convince the girl's parents about the problems and challenges of child marriage. Our main goal is to ensure that the young girls can continue their education and become self-reliant. However, this does not always work, in which case we inform the local commissioner to take legal measures to stop it," shares Kohinoor. Due to her hard work and perseverance,

Kohinoor was elected as the president of the town federation. She works with the CDC and helps them in their planning activities. Kohinoor also created a Facebook group and website to provide information and services to members of the town federation. As a representative of women in leadership, she participated in an international seminar on housing initiatives in Dubai. Under her leadership, the town federation secured four contracts estimated to be worth around 1.25 crore taka. "I am honoured to have the appreciation of my community," says Kohinoor. "In the future, I hope more women like me come forward to combat poverty, illiteracy and the patriarchy, so that we can make the lives of women in the country better."

By Priyam Paul



Shahinur Akhter, now 32, was abandoned by her mother at the age of only six. One fateful winter evening, a gypsy man found a crying Shahinur at the local railway station (often called Boro Station) in Chandpur municipality. The man took her back to his family, and it was his wife, Moyna Begum, who raised Shahinur like their own daughter. "Growing up, life was difficult. While my dream had always been to finish my education, I could only study up to the fifth grade. My family was struggling financially, so I had to stop studying and help out my mother," said Shahinur. Later on, Shahinur started a sewing apprenticeship, where she earned 200 taka every month, while also learning the craft. After one full year of training, she bought a sewing machine for 1500 taka and started her own tailoring business. At one point she was earning 1000 taka per month from her small business. A friend of Shahinur's, Lucky, advised her to save 100 taka per month in the post office savings scheme. Using the

AN UNFALTERING SPIRIT

return from this savings, Shahinur purchased fabric from the market to sew and start selling children's clothes. This doubled her monthly income to 2000 taka. In 2006, Shahinur married a member of the gypsy community, Arab Ali (35). Together, they had two children, and built a house from tin and bamboo on the riverbanks of Dakatia, with the permission of the gypsy community. They financed the construction using a loan from Asha Samiti (micro-credit institution). While things were going well for the family, tragedy struck in the form of Cyclone Amphan in 2020, which destroyed their home. The family had to take another loan, from Arab Ali's office, to rebuild their home. However, even when faced with disaster, Shahinur was resolute in helping her community thrive. She joined the Char Bepari Bari Community Development Committee

(CDC) formed by Chandpur Municipality and UNDP. The members of the CDC elected Shahinur as the president, and she was given the responsibility of being a community leader. "I was selected by UNDP to receive 10,000 taka for business assistance in 2020. This is when I restarted my sewing business. Now, I earn 5,000 taka every month from my business, from which I save 1000 taka and spend the rest on the education of my children," said Shahinur. "In the future, I hope to expand my sewing business and recruit women who I can train. I want to help other women make a living so that they can improve their lives. And someday, when my business is even more successful and I have saved some money, I will buy a piece of land where we can build a permanent residence," Shahinur concluded.

By Aaqib Hasib



A CHAMPION IN THE FIGHT AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE



"My life was not easy. When I was only 17 years of age, my family married me off against my will. I wanted to go to school and finish my education, but the responsibilities of my husband's family fell on my shoulders. As a result, I was only able to study up to the eighth grade," said Shantona Chakma, now 38 years old. However, she always possessed wit and sensibility that made her aware of her surroundings—both people and nature. Shantona possessed a strong voice against all injustices, particularly in the fight for women's rights in her community. This led to her eventual appointment as the "Karbari" (traditional village head) of Ramharipara, Ghilachari Union, Naniarchar Upazila, Rangamati. The hill tracts have seen massive deforestation, hill cutting, and other man-made environmental hazards, slowly pushing the nature of livelihoods of the areas' people into grave risks. This phenomenon deeply concerned Shantona, as someone who was just as close to the



nature as her people. She realised how climate change had impacted her life for the last two decades and those of other women from her community. This realisation came particularly after an incident of a landslide that took the lives of 19 people in her area, including children. Shantona wanted to work on these issues, and soon after, became a central committee member of the CHT Village Common Forest (VCF) Network and the secretary of CHT women headman (traditional mouza head) and Karbari Network. As part of these two bodies, Shantona contributed to conserving natural forests and resources, monitoring VCF management, and protecting safe habitats for wildlife. She received several trainings, participated in workshops, meetings, seminars, conferences, dialogues, learning visits, and conveyed messages on deforestation and watershed conservation to her locality and beyond. To make a sustainable environmental impact, she

developed sustainable VCFs and registered them under the Rangamati Hill District Council. Even then, the fight was far from over. VCF's property was converted to personal property and sold by influential quarters with ill motives. This resulted in a decrement in the number of VCFs in Naniarchar from 15 to 8. Shantona became vigilant, and kept monitoring the remaining eight VCFs. She disseminated conservation messages received from USAID and UNDP projects to VCF committees, and has been working even harder to register more VCFs under the network to conserve natural forest. "In the future, I hope to continue helping people who are struggling with their lives. If I can help those who are helpless, provide shelter to the homeless, and give food to those who need it, then I will be happy," concluded Shantona.

By Nahaly Nafisa Khan